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THE SCOPE AND FUNCTION OF THE APOSTOLATE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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No term in the New Testament is more familiar to the ordinary Bible reader than that which is to be discussed in this article. Probably the larger number of intelligent Christians would be willing, without hesitation, to attempt a satisfactory explanation of the title "apostle." And yet few words in the vocabulary of early Christianity have been the occasion of keener controversy. We shall try to reach a more or less adequate view of the facts by laying aside some common presuppositions and applying the historical method to the material afforded by the New Testament.

I

Perhaps the best approach to our problem is a very brief examination of the history of the term "apostle" (*ἀπόστολος*), outside the pages of the New Testament.

a) The Greek historian Herodotus uses the word repeatedly to denote an "envoy" or "delegate," someone dispatched on a definite mission (e. g., I. 21; V. 38). This, of course, is true to its derivation from the verb *ἀποστέλλω* ("send"), which constantly has the sense of "sending on a mission." The same usage appears in the Septuagint, where, in I Kings 14:6, the prophet Ahijah, speaking to the wife of Jeroboam, says: "I am a grievous delegate (*ἀπόστολος*) to thee;" i.e., he has been commissioned (by God) to bring her sad tidings. Plainly we have an exact parallel to these instances in John 13:16: "A slave is not greater than his lord, neither a delegate (*ἀπόστολος*) than he that commissioned him;" in II Cor. 8:23: "If any enquire concerning Titus, he is my partner . . . or if concerning our brethren, they are delegates (*ἀπόστολοι*) of the churches;" and in Phil. 2:25: "Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow-worker and fellow-soldier, your delegate (*ἀπόστολον*) and minister to my need."

b) Two early Christian writers, Eusebius and Epiphanius, refer to certain selected Jewish delegates who, after the destruction of Jerusalem, were sent out by the Patriarch, now the supreme authority, to collect from the Jews of the Dispersion the money-tribute paid to the patriarchate. These persons were designated "apostles" (ἀπόστολοι). They seem to have possessed large powers. They carried important instructions from the central authority to the provinces, and apparently exercised a kind of disciplinary supervision over the Jewish communities of the Dispersion (see Harnack, *Mission u. Ausbreitung d. Christentums*, pp. 237 ff.). It is scarcely possible that Christian usage can have influenced the adoption by Jews of the name "apostle." So the probability is that the term was current in Judaism with something of the same sense, at a much earlier date. This might afford a starting-point for the strictly Christian conception.

II

Let us now examine the writings of Paul, as they stand chronologically before the gospels and Acts. We are here confronted with some of the obscurities which belong to the determination of the scope and functions of an "apostle."

a) Paul claims for himself the position and functions of an "apostle." What does this claim, in his case, involve? Plainly his apostolic position rests upon a divine call (Rom. 1:1; I Cor. 1:1). It implies a divine selection and commission. The call which set him apart for his great work is immediately associated with the appearance of the risen Jesus to him on the Damascus road. For his eager affirmation, "Have I not seen Jesus our Lord?" (I Cor. 9:1), is evidently intended to confirm his apostolic authority. Moreover, there is no element in the situation which he emphasizes more strenuously than his complete independence of human assistance or counsel at the outset of his apostolic career, when he had to turn his gaze toward the future and determine how the purpose of God was to be carried out by his instrumentality (Gal. 1:1, 17, 19). Further, his apostleship is a function whose validity is guaranteed by its results: "If I be not an apostle to others, yet doubtless I am to you: for the seal of mine apostleship are ye in the Lord" (I Cor. 9:2). Christian lives are the best corroboration of his apostle claims. He can also point

to certain tokens which bear testimony to the genuineness of his apostleship: "Truly the signs of an apostle were wrought among you in all patience, in signs and wonders, and mighty deeds" (II Cor. 12:11).

It must already be obvious that Paul regards an apostle as occupying a unique place in the Christian society. The term has received a content which distinguishes it from the ordinary use of *ἀπόστολος* ("delegate") considered under I a), a use current also in the Christian society.

But before we discuss the *range* of the apostolate from Paul's standpoint, it is important to note one or two specific statements in the epistles which at least approximate to something like a definition. The first is found in Rom. 11:13: "Inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles, I magnify my service" (*διακονίαν*). Here he distinctly affirms that his apostleship is a service, a service to which he can ascribe the highest importance. What that service is, he indicates clearly in Gal. 2:7, 8: "They [the Jerusalem apostles] seeing that I had been intrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcision, even as Peter with that to the circumcision, for he that worked in Peter with a view to the apostleship of the circumcision, worked in me also with a view to the Gentiles." To be an "apostle," according to this passage, is to be intrusted with proclaiming the gospel throughout a certain sphere of influence. And apparently it implies that this is pioneer work, not the ordinary building-up of those already in the faith. The full significance of this consideration will appear when we discuss Jesus' sending-forth of the Twelve. In the present instance he associates with himself his fellow-laborer, Barnabas. Hence, the function of an "apostle," as here interpreted, means leadership in that supremely important province of Christian service which consists in extending the bounds of the Christian society.

These statements of Paul's are peculiarly suggestive, because they occur in a context in which he is above all things concerned to vindicate his apostolic authority. Manifestly there is no hint of an *official* position. An obligation laid upon him by God, a mission prompted by the divine spirit—that and nothing else constitutes the source of the authority which is claimed by the apostle. But it must be observed that the passage which we are considering takes for granted that the "apostle" is a pre-eminent spiritual leader.

It is entirely in accordance with this conception of the apostolate that Paul, when discussing spiritual gifts, places the gift of apostleship in the forefront: "God set some in the church, first apostles, secondly prophets, thirdly teachers, then mighty works, then gifts of healing, helps, administration, kinds of tongues" (I Cor. 12:28). To be an apostle signifies the possession of a unique spiritual gift. That gift is ranked first in the group, because, humanly speaking, the very existence of the church depended on the labors of the apostles, who were responsible primarily for propagating the Christian gospel. He takes up the same position in Eph. 4:11: "He gave some to be apostles, and some prophets, and some, evangelists, and some pastors and teachers." Equally significant is Eph. 2:20. The apostles manifestly are the primary founders of the Christian society, and this because of that spiritual fitness for the function, with which they have been divinely endowed.

b) Now that we have formed some conception of what the status and work of an apostle implied for Paul, we must proceed to consider the question: Whom would Paul be prepared to include within the circle of apostles? This is no mere matter of curiosity, but one which has most intimate bearings upon the whole question before us. Here, the material at our disposal gives us hints rather than definite information. Let us begin with the facts of which we are most certain. As we have seen, Paul is absolutely confident as to his own position. There is no grade of apostleship higher than his (I Cor. 9:1; II Cor. 12:11). Whom would he be willing to classify in this honorable status along with himself? In Gal. 1:17 he says: "Neither went I up to Jerusalem to them that were apostles before me." Speaking of a later visit (in vss. 18, 19) he mentions that he had stayed with Cephas, "but other of the apostles saw I none, save James, the Lord's brother." It seems to us unquestionable (so Haupt, McGiffert, and others, as against Lightfoot) that these words include James among the apostles. This is corroborated by Gal. 2:9, where he groups James with Cephas and John as men "reputed to be pillars." Plainly, James, Cephas, and John stand in the front rank of apostles. They belong to a group which may certainly be distinguished from Christian delegates (*ἀπόστολοι*) in general (see I a) *supra*), of whom, by this time, there must have been a large number.

Of crucial importance for our present inquiry are two passages in I Corinthians. The first is I Cor. 9:5: "Have we no right to lead about a wife that is a believer, even as the rest of the apostles, and the brethren of the Lord, and Cephas? Or I only and Barnabas, have we not a right to forbear working?" Here Paul is asserting his rights as an apostle (9:1, 2). Those to whose example he appeals must certainly be regarded by him as possessing *apostolic* privileges. The group consists of (1) the rest of the apostles, (2) the brethren of the Lord, (3) Cephas. The "rest of the apostles" must mean the remainder of the Twelve, excluding Cephas. On an equal footing with them are placed the "brethren of the Lord." Cephas is named by himself, probably because his practice was cited to the Corinthians as a disparagement of that of Paul (see Heinrici, *ad loc.*). The other statement which has to be examined is I Cor. 15:5f., where he describes the eyewitnesses of the risen Lord: "He appeared to Cephas; then to the Twelve; then he appeared to above 500 brethren at once; then he appeared to James; then to all the apostles; and last of all . . . to me also. For I am the least of the apostles, that am not meet to be called an apostle." At the first glance it would appear as if Paul distinguished here between "the Twelve" and "the apostles." But one might use the same argument to prove that he excluded Cephas from the Twelve. No doubt "all the apostles" refers to the complete available group of Jesus' chosen band of companions. It is virtually identical with "the Twelve" in the earlier clause. This enumeration, to all intents and purposes, tallies with that of I Cor. 9:5f. Here again, setting aside the 500, whom he designates as "brethren," we find the Twelve, James the Lord's brother, and Paul himself, adduced as primary evidence for the resurrection. One can scarcely avoid the conclusion that Paul places the Twelve, the brothers of the Lord and himself, in a special rank as "apostles." The inclusion of the brothers of the Lord is not surprising, as after their entrance into the Christian community at Jerusalem, their kinship and close acquaintance with Jesus would inevitably win for them a special spiritual authority. Paul's language in I Cor. 9:5 suggests that his fellow-worker, Barnabas, may belong to the same category. This we might expect, for Gal. 2:9 certainly implies that Barnabas was associated with him in the apostleship of the gentiles.

Some scholars suppose that in I Thess. 2:6, where Paul refers to the authority "which we might have claimed as apostles of Christ," he includes with himself his companions Silvanus and Timotheus who labored with him in Thessalonica. In our judgment, his usage in this letter, particularly evident in 2:17—3:13, shows that the plural throughout is simply that of authorship. The words of 2:18 and 3:1-2 (to quote two out of many relevant examples) are sufficient proof: "we wished to come to you, I Paul, once and again," "we thought it good to be left behind at Athens alone, and sent Timotheus, our brother." As a matter of fact, in I Cor. 1:1 and Coloss. 1:1, he distinguishes of set purpose between himself as "an apostle of Jesus Christ" and "Timotheus, our brother." The same distinction is made between his own position as "apostle" and "Sosthenes, our brother." These phenomena are exceedingly significant for Paul's point of view.

There is an ambiguous passage, Rom. 16:7, which is used to support the hypothesis of a much more flexible use of the term "apostle" in Paul. There he sends greetings to "Andronicus and Junias, my kinsmen and fellow-captives, men of note (*ἐπίσημοι*) among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me." Does this mean that they were distinguished apostles, or persons highly esteemed by the apostles? Some good scholars adopt the former interpretation; but we have no hesitation in agreeing with Gifford, who quotes some passages which are unassailable evidence for the latter use of *ἐπίσημος*. If those two unknown Christians were "distinguished apostles," it seems to us that the New Testament conception of the apostolate, as indicated by the accumulated testimonies of the various writers, is plunged into hopeless obscurity.

One further reference in Paul must be noted. In II Cor. 11:13 he describes his bitter opponents at Corinth as "false apostles, deceitful workers, fashioning themselves into apostles of Christ." At the first glance these words lend color to the idea that Paul's use of the term "apostle" must have been extremely elastic. But surely the explanation of his language is that these Judaizing opponents of his at Corinth, in attempting to undermine his influence in a church which he himself had founded, were usurping the functions of an "apostle," those functions which undoubtedly belonged to him by virtue of his divine commission.

Accordingly, we think that the conclusion which was arrived at above as to Paul's idea of the scope of the apostolate is justified by a review of all the facts.

III

Let us now turn to the Synoptic Gospels and Acts.

a) It is noteworthy that in the oldest form of the Synoptic tradition, the term "apostle" only occurs once. In Mark 6:30 we read that "the apostles gather themselves together unto Jesus; and they told him all things whatsoever they had done, and whatsoever they had taught." The use of this designation is found in connection with the return of the disciples from their first missionary tour. Hence it is impossible to separate it from the commission given them by Jesus, as reported in Mark 6:7: "And he calleth unto him the twelve, and began to *send them forth* (*ἀποστέλλειν*) two by two; and he gave them authority over the unclean spirits." Here the designation is virtually synonymous with "those whom he had sent forth," "his delegates." Nothing, therefore, can be inferred as to a special status or *office* of the Twelve.

b) In the Gospel of Matthew, the designation occurs only once, and that when the list of the twelve disciples is given: "Now the names of the twelve apostles are these" (Matt. 10:2). But in Matthew the list is given at the point where Jesus sends forth the Twelve on their first preaching tour. Immediately after giving their names, the evangelist proceeds: "These twelve Jesus sent forth" (*ἀποστέλλειν*). So that this occurrence of the term must be estimated on precisely the same lines as that in Mark.

c) When we examine Luke's Gospel, we are confronted with an interesting group of phenomena. When the selection of the Twelve by Jesus to be his constant companions with a view to their training for the future extension of the Kingdom of God is related in 6:13, Luke adds that "he named them apostles." And his words imply that this was a special feature of an important line of action. The Twelve are called "the apostles" in three other passages (17:5; 22:14; 24:10), in which no reason for the designation is apparent except that it had become for Luke a *terminus technicus*.

This usage is almost universal in Acts, which must be discussed along with the Third Gospel, to understand Luke's point of view.

From the very beginning of the book, where the risen Christ is described as "having given commandment to the apostles whom he had chosen" (1:2), up to chap. 16, the term occurs again and again, and with one exception presently to be noted, invariably of the Twelve. The apostles bear witness to the Resurrection (1:26; 4:23). Signs and wonders are wrought by them (2:43; 5:12). They occupy a position of unique authority in the Christian community at Jerusalem (4:35, 37; 5:2, 13, 29, 40). They pray with, and set apart, the Seven for service (6:6). They are regarded as the instruments through whom the Holy Spirit is bestowed (8:18). They are clearly distinguished from the "brethren" in Judea (11:1). On two occasions they are mentioned separately from the "elders" at Jerusalem (15:2, 6; 16:4). In one place they are grouped with "the Church" and "the elders" (15:4); in another they are distinguished from both "the elders" and "the brethren" (15:23). When there is a great dispersion of the Christian community, the "apostles" remain at Jerusalem (8:1). And they send some of their number to examine for themselves the mission carried on in Samaria (8:14). In view of the data we have collected from Paul's epistles, it is interesting to find that Paul and Barnabas are named "apostles" emphatically in 14:4 and 14:14. This is the one exception to Luke's usage, which was mentioned above.

Obviously for Luke the Twelve are the "apostles" *par excellence*, the special "commissioners" or "delegates" of Christ to the world. With them he is willing to group Paul and Barnabas as pre-eminent Christian missionaries. And yet in Luke there is no trace of an apostolic order or office. The Twelve are naturally revered by their brethren as the intimate companions of Jesus, as those first set apart and trained by the Master to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom. It would be inevitable that their judgment should be relied on, and their counsel sought in every emergency of the young Christian community. But a man like Paul who had proved his worth, who had labored more than all, who had been the mightiest witness to the risen Christ, could scarcely be excluded from the innermost circle of the Lord's ambassadors. And often, if not invariably, there would be a disposition to include his devoted fellow-laborer, Barnabas, so famous a pioneer in missionary effort among the gentiles.

IV

The half-dozen remaining passages of the New Testament which mention "apostles" add little to the material which we have examined. The only one that calls for brief notice is Rev. 2:2: "Thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars." This use of the term might be interpreted on the same lines as II Cor. 11:13. But here it seems to have a wider bearing. The Apocalypse distinctly recognizes "the twelve apostles" (21:14). But the statement we are discussing appears to have in view a much larger group of Christian workers. The term "apostle," toward the close of the first century, has evidently grown more elastic. The claim to be an "apostle" cannot, by this date, have been rare. Those who made it had to be tested. This process is, of course, inconceivable in the case of the group to which Paul or Luke would have assigned the name, according to the evidence we have examined. And it is noteworthy that in I Clement, the term "apostle" is confined to the Twelve and Paul (42, 1; 47, 4). But in the Didache (perhaps about 130 A. D., possibly much earlier), the designation has a far wider range: "Let every apostle that cometh to you be received in the Lord. But he shall only remain one day, and if need be, a second day also; but if he remain three days, he is a false prophet" (11:4, 5). Plainly, the name is now given to itinerant preachers, some of whom, if we may judge by the restriction just quoted, must have abused their position for purposes of gain. Indeed it would almost appear from Didache 11:5, 6 that there is now no rigid distinction between "apostles" and "prophets." The danger is, from this condition of things at the beginning of the second century, to draw inferences as to the situation, e. g., in the time of Paul (see Schmiedel on "Corinthians," in the *Hand-Commentar*, p. 192).

V

Let us attempt to sum up the conclusions which we seem justified in reaching from the evidence examined above.

a) The twelve disciples, whom Jesus trained to carry on the work of establishing and extending the Kingdom of God among men, are first called "apostles" in connection with the experimental missionary tour on which they were sent forth by their Master. Haupt (*Zum*

Verständnis des Apostolats im N. T., p. 108) is apparently of opinion that Luke's definite statement as to Jesus naming them "apostles" is simply a deduction from Mark 3:14, where the evangelist describes Jesus as appointing the Twelve to be his companions, and that he might send them forth (*ἀποστέλλειν*) to preach. He finds the basis of the designation in such passages as John 17:18: "As thou didst send me into the world, even so sent I them into the world;" 20:21: "As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you." This connection may be frankly admitted, and yet it is by no means improbable that Jesus did call the Twelve his "apostles" or delegates. Indeed this is most likely to be the explanation of the use of "apostle" (which was a word in current circulation), with a special *nuance* of meaning in the New Testament.

What the function of apostleship involved came, of course, more and more clearly into view after the Resurrection, when Jerusalem became the center of the young Christian community. There was no formal office. The expression, "apostolic college," so often used, implies a fixed organization for which there is no evidence in the New Testament.¹ The apostles were looked up to as the guides and counselors of the society. They had the authority of spiritual distinction, a distinction fundamentally due to their selection by Jesus and their intercourse with him. Leadership in the direction of the existing body of Christian disciples and in the expansion of the faith as opportunity offered—this must naturally fall to men whom Jesus himself had commissioned to promulgate the good news of the Kingdom, both before and after his resurrection.

b) Paul's evidence, which is found in rich variety, suggests that at the time of his conversion the "apostles" were the Twelve, and on the same footing with them were the "brethren of the Lord," most notably James. Here again a special connection with Jesus includes these men in the group of his particular "delegates." But it need scarcely be pointed out that this inclusion would have been impossible, if they had not possessed certain unique spiritual endowments. Paul's own apostleship stands in a category by itself. The

¹Not even in Acts 1:21-26, where the election of Matthias is not to an office, but to bear witness to the Resurrection. The completion of the number twelve is, no doubt, due to the desire to preserve the symbolic reference to the twelve tribes which Jesus must have had in view when he chose this particular group.

various foundations on which it rests have been fully discussed. His vocation had come from God. He was peculiarly qualified to bear witness to the risen Christ. The original apostles recognized his sphere of work. That work was abundantly attested by its accompaniments and its results. Only unscrupulous foes could challenge his right to a place in "the glorious company." But of all his companions in the founding of the Kingdom, only his honored fellow-worker Barnabas, so far as we can estimate the evidence, is admitted into the group of apostles. Timotheus, Titus, Apollos, Silvanus, and the rest—they are "brethren," itself an honorable appellation, but ranking below that of "apostle," which belonged only to those who had the spiritual endowment for doing pioneer work in the founding of Christian communities among Jew and gentile.

c) The evidence of Acts, which has already been summed up at the close of III c), need not be repeated. In spite of such eminent authorities as Harnack and McGiffert, we can find no divergence between the general standpoint of Luke and that of the Pauline epistles.

d) A wider use of the term "apostle" appears in the Apocalypse. The best commentary on this is the famous eleventh chapter of the Didache, which gives instructions as to the proper treatment of "apostles" and "prophets."